Godard's Criticism Through 1958
Michael Silverman

Godard's early criticism reads like a series of brief dispatches filed by a front-line correspondent in some continuing cultural war. Brief and non-expository, they contain names of the living and dead, casualties and victories, territory gained or lost. One memorable occasion finds the critic sitting in the dark watching Ophuls' CAUGHT, while outside "the machine-guns rattled and rebels stormed the Bolivian government palace" (#31). Evidently this occurred on a trip to South America taken between 1953 and 1956; the real urgency emanates from the screen, not the streets. Also from books: Stendhal, Balzac and Dostoyevsky receive as much passing attention as Hawks, Cukor and Welles. Neither set is elevated over the other, nor is literature played off against the cinema. Clearly, though, certain film-makers do things that particularly interest Godard: Hitchcock receives three attentive reviews (#s 8, 13, 19) which focus on the clarity of his exposition and the logic of plots; Ray is applauded for his ability to transform intractable material, sometimes semi-consciously, into cinema through composition and passion (#s 16, 22, 26); Frank Tashlin offers freedom and a cartoonist's sense of visual construction which may form the original impulse for the familiar arrangement by Godard of characters against blank surfaces, or for the overt use of cartoons and advertising in the films dating from UNE FEMME MARIEE (#s 12, 21, 23).

All Godard's criticism, his films too, seem ontologically possessed--they constantly ask the same question, which forms the title of #10. The daring of Bazin's enquiries into the nature of the medium lies in simply assuming that no one had correctly answered the question ("What is cinema?) before, perhaps in even assuming that no one had really asked. Like the ethnologist he had trained himself to be, Godard starts at the beginning--movie-going. His concerns move

gradually toward direction, but along the way he takes care to dissociate himself

from Bazin's opposition between montage and the revelation of physical reality.

Even at this early stage Godard seems able to work in terms of the "multiple

diegesis" claimed for the post-WEEKEND Godard by P. Wollen ("Counter Cinema:

XVENT D'EST," Afterimage, No. 4 [1972]). In "Montage, mon beau souci"(#14, 1956)

Godard posits that far from being historically dissociated, montage and "mise

en scène become inextricably linked in any good film, whether ALEXANDER NEVSKY

or THE NAVIGATOR.

> Knowing how long one can make a scene last is already montage, just as think-
> ing about transitions is part of the problem of shooting. Certainly, a bril-
> liantly directed film gives the impression of having simply been placed end
> to end, but a film brilliantly edited gives the impression of having suppres-
> sed all direction (p. 40).

Ultimately one may reject all the current (1956) tenets of the emergent Cahiers

criticism--depth of field, long take, rejection of montage:

> Invention and improvisation takes place in front of the movieola just as
> much as it does on the set. Cutting a camera movement in four may prove more
> effective than keeping it as shot/ (p. 40).

Here, though, "effective" use of editing still means narrative efficiency and

emotional power, the very things Godard would begin to reject after 1968. When

critics objected to the jump cuts in BREATHLESS, Godard replied that they seemed

natural to him; later he might have insisted on their dissociative strength.

Godard does not reject the long take as such, but it becomes connected for him

much more fully with an examination of a particular shot--the full-face close-up.

We can see him examining the faces of Seberg, Karina and Bardot, and can understand

his ambiguous fascination with Ingmar Bergman. Especially in BREATHLESS, THE LITTLE

SOLDIER, CONTEMPT, MY LIFE TO LIVE and A MARRIED WOMAN Godard presents a series

of portraits and a series of experiments with the close-up. The theme of the

"look" may be inherited from Dostoyevsky through Bresson, may find a source in

Poe's "Oval Portrait," which Godard's voice reads in MY LIFE TO LIVE. At any

rate, it becomes the "key piece" in fusing performance with construction:

> Cutting on a look is almost the definition of montage, its supreme ambition
> as well as its submission to <u>mise en scène</u>. It is, in effect, to bring out
> the soul under the spirit, the passion behind the intrigue, to make the heart
> prevail over the intelligence by destroying the notion of space in favor of
> that of time (p. 39).

Notice that this ultimate harmony destroys, or at least vanquishes, intelligence

in order that acquiescent and submissive unity might prevail. Precisely as the

camera effectively persuades us of the image's integrity, the mind gives way to

the soul, passion and the heart.

This essential romanticism dominates Godard's longer pieces. Even in a film

like THE WRONG MAN, one of Hitchcock's most clinically detached works, Godard

can find this theme of the "look" and can see it as the intense center of the

film:

> Closing the discussion with Rose, who is already in bed, comes the first
> of five or six marvellous close-ups which illuminate the film with brilliant
> flashes worthy of Murnau, not to mention Dreyer. . . . The beauty of each of
> these close-ups, with their searching attention to the passage of time,
> comes from the sense that necessity is intruding on triviality, essence on
> existence. The beauty of Henry Fonda's face during this extraordinary second
> which becomes interminable is comparable to that of the young Alcibiades
> described by Plato in <u>The Banquet</u>. Its only criterion is the exact truth.
> We are watching the most fantastic of adventures because we are watching
> the most perfect, the most exemplary, of documentaries (p. 49).

The "look" is [potentially (!)] reflexive, of course, since the film-maker [inevitably — tho G wouldn't think so] becomes the un-named ['suture']

presence who, along with the audience, looks back at this truth and beauty. In

THE LITTLE SOLDIER, Bruno photographs Veronica: ". . . and suddenly, I had the

extraordinary feeling of photographing death. Then everything was normal once

more." Karina stares at the camera, straight on, then moves her pose. The film

ends badly for the woman (as most Godard films do, as THE WRONG MAN almost does,

as Dreyer's films tend to do). The film-maker remains unimplicated, escapes into

the next film, though he may be cognizant of the aesthetic properties of death.

Godard begins to replace the missing half of the glance when he begins to

[has an opportunity]

distinguish between those film-makers who see and those who look (#37; Bergman

is played off here against Visconti). Those who see may be called auteurs, those

who book metteurs en scène--and the distinction lies in a kind of freedom and an

open willingness to be "open to the temptations of chance" (p. 79). Those who

merely look become characterized by "precision" and films whose shots possess

"their own abstract value in as movements in space" (P. 79). In claiming this

radical freedom for the film maker, of course, Godard's project is to avoid any

acknowledgement of the glance emanating from the screen. Precisely in their

refusal to avoid the implication of each movement in space, Visconti and Lang

place themselves in immediate relationship to the processes of their own fictions.

To give Godard credit, his work increasingly comes to reflect a similar preoccupation,

as does, interestingly enough, the work of Bergman, who had here stood as an

example of the "open" auteur. As THE LITTLE SOLDIER gives way to TWO OR THREE

THINGS or PIERROT, we do not feel a loss of freedom and lyricism, but we do feel

an increasing willingness to acknowledge in available ways the nature of the

image. Here the glance no longer becomes a means of mystification and romanticized

responses, the victory of "essence over existence." The weight of each shot has

not yet been drained of passion in the service of intellect. At its best the "look"

(perhaps exemplified conveniently in Marina Vlady's open, unself-conscious gaze

at the opening of TWO OR THREE THINGS) acknowledges our presence, takes into account

the manifold vantage points of the narrative, and proceeds to encourage and subvert

our gaze and the autonomy of transparent fictions.

— romantic posture of the single shot which
  'saves' the film

Jeremy Butler

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Looks, glances and the close-up in VIVRE SA VIE

In the evolution of the cinema the close-up has come to be a somewhat
facile method for communicating that which cannot be comfortably translated
into dialogue. A close-up of Lillian Gish comforting her sick child in
WAY DOWN EAST reveals not just her superficial consternation, but indeed,
the nuances of her most deep-felt sorrows. Josef von Sternberg's caresses
of the face of Marlene Dietrich invites the viewer to puzzle over her
mysterious, problematical heart and soul. The freeze frame close-up of
Jean-Pierre Leaud in LES QUATRE CENTS COUPS bares the ambiguity of his
uncertain future. Basic as the close-up is there are few instances of
the subject of a close-up facing the camera/audience directly. This is due
in part to the threatening nature of such a pose. By looking straight into
the camera the character in effect acknowledges the existence of the viewer
and with that acknowledgement shatters his or her fortress of complacent
voyeurism. (A character need not fire pistols at the moviegoer, as in
THE GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY, to send them scurrying for cover.)

One of the most inventive and powerful uses of the full frontal close-up
is to be found in Jean-Luc Godard's VIVRE SA VIE. He returns again and
again to the face which we first see in silhouette beneath the credits, i.e.,
the actress, Anna Karina, or the character, Nana, as you will. For the
majority of the film Godard uses close-ups in a fashion similar to the close-ups
in Carl Dreyer's JOAN OF ARC. Which is to say, we investigate the character
of one woman (Joan of JOAN OF ARC, and Nana in VIVRE SA VIE, naturally) largely
through her repeated presentation in close-up. Through his inclusion of a
small portion of JOAN OF ARC Godard invites this comparison and lends
credibility to Dreyer's use of close-up, but in two instances in particular

REINFORCES? ANALYZES?

Godard rejects the aesthetic of the close-up as window to the soul and
utilizes it for the purposes of distanciation. In the section entitled
"Running into Yvette -- Cafe on the outskirts, Raoul -- Machine gun in the
streets" Nana speaks with Yvette of the nature of responsibility. After
this speech and while Yvette goes to the pinball machine to talk with Raoul,
Godard shocks us with a close-up of Nana as she looks directly into the
camera. She seems almost to be asking the viewer, "Do you believe what I've
just said?" Though her look might not be so easily described, it does
prod us to ~~thought~~ think of what she has just said, i.e., "I am responsible."
Is she responsible? Perhaps the character might be thought to be responsible
for her actions (though I have my doubts), but certainly the actress is not.
We know that on a whole actors and actresses are not responsible for either
their lines or their movements -- these are the provinces of the scriptwriter
or the director.

TWICE -- SHE LOOKS WHILE THE MUSIC IS PLAYING, LOOKS DOWN. THEN LOOKS AT US AGAIN.

Scriptwriter Joe Gillis in, not of, SUNSET BOULEVARD correctly points
out that the audience doesn't believe in scriptwriters, they think the actors
make it up as they go along. Even the most intelligent of moviegoers must
admit that their thoughts are not with the scriptwriter while they are watching
a movie that has successfully drawn them into its drama. However in VIVRE SA
VIE Karina's look -- as dictated by Godard -- prevents belief in the illusion
that is the story. We are forced to realize the "truth" of the situation:
Nana exists solely on celluloid, this is a film and the image is a likeness
(a symbol if you will) of Anna Karina, an actress, not a prostitute. Though
there are similarities between the two professions: a prostitute must
convincingly portray/sexual interest in men whose only value to her actually resides
in their wallets. In effect Nana/Karina possesses a third facet to her already
split (character/actress) personality. It would seem that Nana/Karina fits

SINCE THE PERSON WHO 'PRESENTS' THE ACTRESS IS THE CAMERAMAN, IS THERE ANY REASON FOR THE PIMP BEING CALLED RAOUL (AS IN ' RAOUL COUTARD')?

neatly into Raoul's third classification of women, that is, the "three-faced" category: after all, she is an actress (Anna Karina) portraying a character (Nana) portraying one of the permutations of Venus (the prostitute).

The second full frontal close-up in VIVRE SA VIE appears suddenly (and disturbingly) during Nana's conversation with "The stranger", a philosopher. "How does one know what is the right word?", she queries and while the philosopher explains that she must work at it, that she must learn to communicate without "wounding", she looks away from him, then directly into the camera, then at her drink on the table and finally, back in his direction. As with the "responsibility" incident, this sequence possesses an element of distanciation ("potential reflexivity", shall we say?), but more importantly, Nana's look transports her from the realm of VIVRE SA VIE proper, to mid-way between the film's story and the audience or "real life". As before, the look engages the audience and differentiates and detaches Nana from the main body of the work. It illustrates the "death of not talking" that the philosopher contends is necessary to better speech and thought. Her look precludes any conversation with the philosopher. She might communicate with the audience as Tony Randall does in Frank Tashlin's WILL SUCCESS SPOIL ROCK HUNTER?, but, for the short period of the glance, she cannot (or will not) commune with the VIVRE SA VIE world. This proves no hardship for Nana as she suggests (in the same conversation with the philosopher) that it would be very pleasant if we didn't have to talk in order to communicate: "The more we talk the less we say." We might well imagine that the tears she sheds for Joan of Arc are actually tears for the bygone era of the silent screen, when an actress's emotive vocabulary consisted mainly of looks and glances.

LOVE SEEMS TO SPEAK IN SUBTITLES — A LANGUAGE REMOVED FROM ORDINARY DISCOURSE, BUT NOT SUNK INTO THE COLDNESS OF SILENCE.

Nana's predilection for silence is echoed by Godard's reverence for
JOAN OF ARC. The scene from JOAN OF ARC and the use of titles both to
separate the 12 sections and to speak for Nana and the young man point to
a filmmaker enamored of the silent cinema. However, this reverence has its
bounds. Though the close-ups in VIVRE SA VIE stem from Griffith and
Dreyer, the former are are twice used for purposes far removed from the
latter -- as is described above.

Secondary to the full frontal close-up is yet another recurring
utilization of the close-up: various shots of Karina's underexposed face
framed by a brightly lit window. This leads one to the dangerous conclusion
that VIVRE SA VIE is to Karina as the "Oval Portrait" was to its subject.
Is it possible that Godard drew the "tints" for this film "from her [Karina's]
cheeks"? And isn't Nana's comment , "art and beauty, that's what's real in
life", precipitously close to the exclamation of the painter in Poe's story:
"This [the painting] is indeed life itself!"? Finally, wouldn't Poe's
mention of "vague, yet deep shadows" surrounding the portrait's face accurately
describe the perimeter of a motion picture image? Against great temptation
I ignore these possibilities and hope that someone else can explain Godard's odd
behaviour. (I find Godard's decision to personally read "The Oval Portrait"
in voiceover particularly cryptic.) what...

ISN'T THIS SAID THE YOUNG MAN? NANA DOESN'T WANT TO . God SEE PICTURES (AS I RECALL — BUT I'VE BEEN WRONG BEFORE).

"The Iconography of the Movies"

Jeremy Butler

English 166

Mr. Silverman

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"Film criticism is haunted by the spectre of uniqueness," states Lawrence

Alloway in "The Iconography of the Movies." Alloway feels that film critics

should never lose sight of the fact that the cinema's iconographical

character lends itself most readily toward consideration of a film as it

relates to "...that movie's predecessors in the same genre." The "meaning"

we derive from any motion picture must be gleaned through study of these

predecessors. What Alloway means by refering to the "meaning" of a film

is not quite clear. Apparently Alloway believes the best, though not

the only, reason for discussing movies is to pinpoint how the film fits

into an intricate pattern of cycles of movies and a web of iconographical

constructs. We are to draw some satisfaction, apparently, from the realization

that a number of years ago we had a spate of movies revolving around fancy

weapons (as per Alloway's example toward the end of the article). Alloway

sensed that his approach would incur a depreciating attitude from most

critics and, addressing himself to these critics, he demands, " iconography

is not to be isolated from other aspects of film making." Following this

remark he sites a few examples of cycles of movies which are assumed to

possess a self-explanitory import and lay to rest forever any pejorative

talk of "iconographical curiosities."

Alloway quotes with disdain a remark by Ian Cameron that "most films

have...an iconographical interest quite apart from any aesthetic merits

they may have." It is at this point that Alloway paraphrases Cameron's

attitude toward iconographical studies as mere curiosity (see above).

In contradiction of Alloway's perception of Cameron's attitude, Cameron

himself does not take a frivolous view of the iconographical approach.

Cameron states in the introduction to Movie Reader that he thought this

method "could have usefully complimented the auteur criticism..." However,

if we may be allowed some speculation, it does appear that Alloway had the

situation properly in focus after all. For, from what may be surmised

from Movie Reader, the rest of the contributers entertained no great

enthusiasm for Alloway's concept and indeed (as Cameron puts it) "it

was never followed up in Movie."

One of the motivating factors which apparently prompted Alloway to

develop this stance of iconographical chauvinism is the iconoclasm

of the auteur theory held in reverence by many of his brethren on the staff

of Movie. Even though Cameron denies charges that Movie existed as a mere

echo of Cahiers du Cinema, Alloway percieves that a sizeable amount of

Cahiers' thought exists within Movie and its readership. Consequently

Alloway writes directly to the critic under the influence of the politique

des auteurs

> Treating movies as personal expression and autographic
> testament has lead to the neglect of the iconographical
> approach. Praise for directors for example, usually
> relegates iconography to a low place.

He feels that the auteur theory has led to a "neglect of the real problems

of movies..." Due to his concern with the auteur audience, he seems to

be overstating his case. Certainly films must be considered with the

various "icons" of secular society in mind, be they a performer's

on screen persona, a weapon, a communication device or a cycle of films.

It is most assuredly necessary to note how a film weaves strands of

history into its own fabric, but these considerations are simply the

customary considerations of an intelligent critic.

Thus, "The Iconography of the Movies" strikes one as an unconvincing

request of the auteur critics to consider films for reasons other than the

directorial signature. It also calls for critics of all persuasions to

consider films of less merit in more depth. Alloway would have us

IN FAIRNESS TO ALLOWAY, THOUGH, IT SHOULD BE POINTED OUT THAT THE AUTEUR THEORY (PRECISELY RULES OUT THESE CONSIDERATIONS FROM THE EVALUATION OF ANY FILM — THUS, CONTENT + THE KNOWLEDGE WE BRING FROM THE WORLD TO THE FILM (ELEMENTS WHICH ALLOWAY IS TRYING TO RESTORE TO CRITICISM) ARE RULED OUT BY CAMERON, PERKINS, etc.

consider all movies because "the meaning of a single movie is inseparable from the larger pattern of content-analysis of other movies." The audience has a common pool of "continuing convention and a body of expectations" about an actor or a genre or a gimmick such as the weapon Western. It is the filmmaker's duty to understand this pool if he/she wishes to make a successful movie. It is the film critic's job to interpret the movie with regard first of all to what has proceeded it iconographically. In effect, Alloway is attempting to define what may be called the "collective unconscious of the cinema" (to borrow slanderously from Jung). He wants to know with alacrity what is contained in the mind of the moviegoer each time he/she attends a screening. This knowledge is exceedingly necessary for the following reason:

> Such themes as kitchen technology and domestic liesure
> in soap opera and male outdoor leisure clothes, as well
> as attitudes towards violence in Westerns, exist outside
the movies, but aid identification with the movies once you are
> inside of the cinema.

This inept passage (which, if anything, gains sense removed from context) brings to light one reason why this article might fail to win the sympathies of the reader. Alloway's style is confounding -- at crucial moments in the text he assumes that you know and agree with what his next thought will be. Under this assumption he gives examples which make little sense and draws conclusions out of thin air. He begins the article on the offensive, charging that the auteur theory has lead to the "neglect of the iconographical approach," but shortly into his discourse he sheds that conviction and assumes that the reader agrees with him in toto and, indeed, may soon suggest some examples on his/her own.

SIEGFRIED KRACAUR: CAMERA-REALITY CHAUVINIST

1 —.

CAREFULLY ARGUED, WITH SOME WIT TO
LEAVEN KRACAUER'S SERIOUSNESS.

jeremy butler

english 166

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Siegfried Kracauer in Theory of Film firmly believes in an aesthetic encouraging a cinema restricted to what he describes in a fit of redundancy as "actually existing physical reality" (p. 28). This aesthetic leads him to a reverence (or perhaps this reverence lead him to the aesthetic) for the best in Italian Neorealism along the lines of Umberto D. (especially Umberto D.), Cabiria, La Strada and Bicycle Theives. These are films which, ostensibly due to their "realistic" narratives, "actual" settings and "physical", occasionally non-professional, actors, remain true to the form that Lumiére unconsciously established in the late 19th century with what he considered merely a business venture. (No mention is made of Lumiére's counterpart in the U.S., Edison -- apparently because it would complicate the distinction Kracauer is attempting to make between reality and fantasy, Lumiére and Melies.)

Kracauer draws evidence for the realistic affinities of film from film's base in still photography and that medium's predilection to reflect reality. This in itself is a disputable fact, for cinema in many aspects bears closer resemblance to literature or music than a static form such as photography. From these shaky, a priori assumptions he concludes that there is little, though some, room for fantasy in the cinema. (The mere narrowness of his aesthetic is enough to make one distrustful of it.) Disregarding for the moment his ambiguous definition (or lack thereof) of "camera reality" and "fantasy" , let us first explore the more salient aspects of his thesis. (As we proceed these problems of definition will become more evident.) He breaks fantasy down into three divisions: "Fantasy established in a stagy manner", "Fantasy established by means of cinematic devices" and "Fantasy established in terms of physical reality".

Under the heading "Fantasy established in a stagy manner" he discusses first of all the epitome of stagy fantasy, Robert Weine's The Cabinet of Dr.

Caligari. He feels this is a cinematic failure because fantasy is placed upon the same plane as "camera-reality" (a term I find difficult to deal with). He has defined aesthetic superiority as that which approaches reality and as such the highly controlled sets and stylized make-up of "Caligari" hardly fit in: they are too artificial. What is worse, they claim to be real. Even at the denouement, when we emerge from the madman's vision of reality, the sets continue to be grotesquely stylized.

Surely now is the time for an objection to Kracauer's logic: he objects to "Caligari" because it is artifical and claims to be real. But isn't this the basis of all story films and indeed, film in general? No matter how commonplace (or realistic) the story of Bicycle Thieves it is not the exact representation of something that happened to someone and even if it were it was not filmed as it happened. Kracauer himself admits that "itsis entirely possible that a stagedreal life event evokes a stonger illusion of reality on the screen than would the original event if it had been captured directly by the camera." (p. 35) Carrying it one step further, even if we could believe that what we saw transpire on the screen was built from actual footage of a man who had his bike stolen, it is not presented to us in a completely realistic fashion. Just as most movies, Bicycle Thieves employs cuts, and dissolves, selecting the choice moments from the "life" of an unemployed Roman in post war Italy. In the same fashion, a selective process was used to decide what will be audible on the soundtrack. Bicycle Thieves reflects reality in neither content or form: the story is artificial and so is the manner in which it is presented to us. (It's unfortunate that Theory of Film was written before Andy Warhol's experiment in actually reflecting "camera-reality" with a realistic temporal continuum, i.e., Sleep (1963)) Kracauer feels this artificial quality is "legitimate if

the staged world is made to appear as a faithful reproduction of the real

one." (p. 34)

His second consideration in this category is the stagy fantasy which

supports the "cinematic" elements. Kracauer believes that a fantastic interlude

which lays no claim to being reality's cinematic equal, supports the realistic

sector of the movie by contrast. The real seems all the more "realistic"

because it is contrasted with fantasy. At this point he singles out the

musical, and though he doesn't name Gene Kelly, in particular, as one of the

members of this group of unknowing cinematic saviors, I feel a look at An

American in Paris would be a helpful illustration. Gene Kelly and Leslie

Caron dancing romantically through a set constructed largely of scarves

and expressionistic leftovers from "Caligari" makes Kelly and Caron kissing

on the streets of Paris all the more realistic. Going one step beyond that,

if we were constantly in the company of Kelly and Caron in our day to day

life and then went to see An American in Paris, when we returned to the

real life couple they would seem all the more realistic -- but they would

certainly not be more aesthetically appealing. Even in film, realism has

no monopoly on aesthetic beauty.

In the second category in this chapter Kracauer dives into the controversy

(for the most part self-induced) of fantasy established by means of "multiple

exposures, superimpositions, distorting mirrors, special editing devices and

what not" (p. 87). As in the first category he attacks this subject through

two alternatives: fantasy pretending to be real and fantasy which admits it's

fantasy and consequently contrasts with realism. In the former case, he

believes such films "are in a measure cinematic because they lean on the

technical properties of the medium for the creation of their demons and

apparitions." (p. 87) This is to be opposed to "Caligari" because that

film uses the technical properties of the stage (sets, make-up) instead of

the cinema (multiple exposures and the like). Unfortunately, according to

Kracauer, these devices "are used...for purposes outside its [cinema's]

main concerns [i.e., realism]." and as a result he brushes them away. Cinematic

tricks are approved if they aspire toward realism: making The Parent Trap

(starring Haley Mills in a double role achieved ~~thru~~ through trick photography) more

aesthetically appealing than Nosferatu (which courts the supernatural).

As in the first category, he believes that if fantasy is subordinated

to realism it is admirable. In this case, fantasies must be "either treated

in a playful manner or assigned the role of dreams." (p. 88) They "go

beyond stagy ones in that they not only acknowledge the ascendancy of the

real world in their capacity of dreams but are actually derived from shots

rendering that world." (p. 89) Into this caldron go characters such as

those in Topper, The Ghost and Mrs. Muir, etc.

In his third and final category of fantasy, Kracauer reaches a plane

upon which he can accept fantasy. The catch is that fantasy must be created

with realistic elements. He uses an example drawn from Cavalcanti's

Dead of Night: a man goes outdoors during the dead of night and it is bright

as day. In this manner the fantastic is created, but it's through the use

of what could be a realistic setting. Another example Kracauer may have

used is Mizoguchi's interpretation of phantoms in Ugetsu Monogatari: in

this film Lady Wakasa and Miyagi are as solid and physical as the other characters,

but for the fact that they are exceedingly perishable and generally dissolve

quietly off-screen.

This is all not as neat as it appears. Kracauer's aesthetic applies

in relativistic terms only. His basic concept exalting realism taken to its

logical extreme, as with Warhol's experiments, results in absurdity. Certainly

YES, THINGS DO GET A BIT PROBLEMATICAL WHEN INDIVIDUAL FILMS ARE CITED WHICH FULFILL KRACAUER'S CATEGORIES. BUT TURN OUT TO BE UNINTERESTING IN THEMSELVES.

there's not avoiding a semblance to reality when one wishes to deal with the narrative film -- anything else would be nonsensical -- but to declare realism the goal to which all film must aspire constricts movies unnecessarily and inspecifically.

CRITICIZING THE CRITIC:

Comments on Pauline Kael's "The Group"

jeremy butler

english 166

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In Pauline Kael's article on <u>Bonnie and Clyde</u> she refers to <u>Dr. Strangelove</u>
in this fashion:

> It ridiculed everything and everybody itshowed, but concealed
> its own liberal pieties, thus protecting itself from ridicule
> [emphasis hers].

The irony of this statement is that had she only substituted herself for
Stanley Kubrick's black comedy she would have obtained an accurate description
of her essay on <u>The Group</u>. She harps on much and honors little, adopting
a practical cynicism which suits a day to day film critic well, but encumbers
any proclivities she may have toward film theory. Particularly irritating
to the young reader with an interest in film is her constant chipping away
at the ideology of youth and the idealism of many young persons enamored of
film. In this essay on <u>The Group</u> (contained in <u>Kiss Kiss Bang Bang</u>) her
distasteful attitude toward young "film enthusiasts" surfaces in a rather
(p. 99)
vague comment: she writes condescendingly of director Sidney Lumet's approach
to the screenplay -- terms his ideas "superficially plausible" and then declares
that it is the type of idea "that young kids <u>would</u> think was brilliant."
Being a "young kid" myself, I cannot help but be rubbed the wrong direction.
She habitually refers to students and film fans as leperous, para-human
members of society. Their opinions count for nothing in her pragmatic
scheme of things. She is not trying to capture the hearts of those cinophiles,
rarely found in the daylight, let alone at a newstand where the <u>New Yorker</u>
is sold.

Regardless of Kael's attitude toward college students her articles
demand both a college education and a somewhat thorough knowledge of movies.
There can be no dispute that she weaves her eclectic erudition into the cloth
of her essays with an adroit, sometimes clever (as she defines the term),
hand. "...waiting for Lakey to reappear is about like waiting for Godot"
(p. 86) declares Kael in a sudden comparison between Beckett and Buchman

[handwritten margin note:] IT'S TRUE, SHE DOES NOT MARRY AT "YOUTH" + "THE COLLEGE CROWD" (AS SHE CALLS IT).

(scriptwriter for The Group). She writes for an audience with a certain
amount of knowledge understood, as must any author, and her audience is
mostly college educated. They harbor an interest in movies, but generally
they are not captivated enought by film history or aesthetics to read
Kracauer or Burch or even Perkins. They need someone with an authoritative
air to help them decide which movie they ought to see this month.

I DON'T THINK
SHE THINKS
SO.

Kael shares the sensibilities of her readers. She writes of how a
movie **affects** her and consequently the reader is able to deduce how any
particular film will affect them. This affective approach to film criticism
often leads her to contradictions and a judgement of films unabashedly
congruent with her personality -- as is evident with her evaluation of
The Group. Certainly she dislikes the movie, but she doesn't feel comfortable
attacking a movie with so many appealing histrionics. She qualifies her
condemnation of the movie stating, "despite its carelessness and sloppy
style, it is one of the few interesting American movies of recent years
(p. 121)." Earlier (p. 106) she softens the blow with this observation:

> In watching Lumet work, I was torn between detesting his
> fundamental tastelessness and opportunism and recognizing
> the fact that at some level it all works. It obviously, too
> obviously, wants to be moving, but damn it, it is.

The concept that The Group is moving in spite of itself palls in the face
of the fact that at the screening I attended the audience laughed uproariously
at those scenes which were supposedly so "damn" moving. As Andrew Sarris put
it, there's a lot more "kiss kiss" than "bang bang" in her reviews. One
wonders if she would evaluate a careless, sloppy, violent picture as
"interesting" regardless of the amount of vitality incopporated in it.

Kael fairs alright with superficial comments about film technique
(e.g., her comments on choppy editing and bad color in this article), but

once she dips her hand into theory it comes up muddy. Take for example her
appraisal of the "free and improvisatory" elements of filmmaking: according
to Kael these are the primary elements of the art of cinema. If they aren't
present, then it isn't art.-- a dangerous generalization to make. She
utilizes Hitchcock's well-known predilection for precisely planning his
scenes out ahead of time as an example of the "gamesmanship" that she then
opposes to Renoir's, supposedly, loose technique. *(read "art")* For some undefined reason
Renoir's ability to "discover" (to use Kael's word) on the set is aesthetically
superior to Hitchcock's ability to create before rolling the cameras. Kael
assumes her equation of discovery with art to be self-evident and builds
around it. In the end she has constructed a donut of an argument. Even
her claim that Renoir's "greatest work has been free and improvisatory"
(p. 94) is certainly open to inspection. What of the tightly constructed
camera movement of Le Crime de Monsieur Lange or the intricate plots and *sub-plots of*
La Regle du Jeu? Are we to believe that these outstanding moments of cinema
were discovered on the set just seconds before the camera started shooting?
She has given us little reason to believe that her view of Hitchcock is
any better than Robin Wood's veneration of him and furthermore has failed to
provide a satisfactory example of "free and improvisatory" filmmaking.
THIS IS THE CRUX, SURELY.

The sections of this article least vulnerable to attack are those
most contained within the film business. (In the case of the article on
The Group almost the entire piece is comprised of these "behind the scenes"
views.) The reader has no way to verify Kael's comments regarding the
reputation of men and women within the industry ("As a screenwriter, Sidney
Buchman is known as a good man at 'construction'..." p. 97). In these
instance we must trust her judgement -- a judgement which, if one enjoys
Kael, is similar to the judgement we might make had we the resources at her

disposal. Herein lies the central appeal of Kael's work: she so often

reacts to movies as one might initially react to movies∧and she's got the

wit and perception to convey these reactions in an enjoyable style. Hers

is not a criticism based upon studied contemplation, but instead one of

reaction. To paraphrase Kael: In reading Pauline's work, I was toʀn

between detesting her fundamental superficiality and opportunism and

recognizing the fact that at some level it all <u>works</u>. It obviously, too

obviously, wants to be revelatory, but damn it, it is, maybe.

1— I MUST SAY, THOUGH, THAT THE IDEA OF GOING BEHIND THE SCENES, TO VIEW A MOVIE BEING ASSEMBLED, INTRIGUES ME — + SEEMS TO ME AN AREA DELIBERATELY EXCLUDED FROM MOST AUTEUR CRITICISM (EXCEPTING THOSE ADULATORY VIEWS OF CRUSTY JOHN FORD, OR CHARMING GEORGE CUKOR AT WORK).

YOU'RE RIGHT, THOUGH, THAT KAEL DOESN'T SUCCEED IN SETTING FORTH ANY <u>ANALYSIS</u> WHICH WOULD HELP US WITH OTHER FILMS.

A CRITIQUE OF TWO ESSAYS BY JOHN LAWSON

jeremy butler

english 166

november 13, 1974

John Lawson's essays entitled "Denial of Reality" and "Violence" are both
greatly determined by Marxist ideology. Take as an obvious example his
critique of "bourgeois intellectuals" such as Hans Richter and Maya Deren
(p. 227):

> Their rejection of captitalism is unrealistic, because
> they do not see it in its historical perspective, as a
> phase of human development that has run its course and
> must now give way to a higher form of social organization.

Little comment need be made to elucidate the Marxist elements in this
statement: Lawson firmly believes, consonant with Marx, that mankind must
evolve through many economic and social stages and that following the decline
of capitalism will be the golden era of socialism. (The fact that this evolution
was either greatly abridged or totally absent in the Russian Revolution does
not phase Lawson, writing in 1964.)
faze

In keeping with this ideology Lawson rejects Hollywood cinema largely
because of its unabashedly commercial basis. In his general condemnation of
the "Cahiers du Cinema group" he emphasizes his dislike for their veneration
of the work of Alfred Hitchcock. He detests Hitchcock's "ethical concepts"
because of "his commercial pandering to the most depraved taste..." Lawson
writes again and again of the vulgarities of Hollywood. Oddly, he praises
the
Godard for his ability to reflect/modern day world and condemns Hollywood
for their capability to accurately gage the tastes of that modern day world.
Though to qualify this statement, Lawson's attitude toward Godard is more
ambiguous than laudatory -- however he certainly reserves more respect for
Godard than Godard's professed idols.

Lawson's judgement of any given film is based emphatically upon the
morality of the movie. He considers American commercial film immoral and
implicitly "bad" -- and so it is the morality of the ^avant gyarde "New American Cinema"
(lead by Jonas Mekas in the pages of Film Culture -- and the Village Voice,
though Lawson makes no mention of it) which saves it ^(the New American Cinema) from total condemnation.

AAARLH! DICTIONARY!

As Lawson puts it (p. 226):

> Their ["creators of nonrealist films'"] rejection of the commercial
> story-film is a rejection of the society that sponsors these
> mendacious narratives. This is a moral judgement because it
> implies an idea of what constitutes a good society.

The paradox, according to Lawson, resides in the conflict between thier hatred

of bourgeoise ideals and their actual position as bourgeoise intellectuals.

How can they pledge to destroy a society they are an integral part of and

upon which they depend for livelihood?

Also evident in the two chapters from Film: the Creative Process under

consideration here is Lawson's assumption that art follows life. He concludes

that the reason for the profusion of murders in Shakespeare's plays is that

"Killings were more prevalent in sixteenth-century England than in any modern

society..." (p. 231). To state that the sixteenth century was especially

bloody is a rash enough statement in itself, but further to imply that the

social milieu prompted Shakespeare to fill his plays with gore can hardly be justified. One might

as well expect Shakespeare to have written profusely about the rampant poverty

of Elizabethan England, but such is not the case. Certainly some of the attutudes of an epoch are to

be discovered in any work of art, but to ignore the artist's sensibility in

favor of the influence of the age must indeed be excessive. Bringing it up

to the present time, he feels that the alienation present in the works of

Fellini, Antonioni, Resnais and Godard stems from the current world situation.

In citing A Bout de Souffle he states, "Godard introduces us to a chaotic

world which seems closer to contemporary reality. These people seem to have

no inner life at all" (p. 238). (Earlier he berated the "bourgeoise intellectuals"

for their petty concerns, but here he finds "inner life", a typically bourgeoise

concern (what worker has the time to contemplate Life?), a subject worthy of

study.) Lawson reserves any judgement of Godard, but he does seem disappointed

that modern day society has reached a level of alienation so severe that it

WASN'T ELIZ ENGLAND A PERIOD OF UPHEAVAL + ECONOMIC GROWTH ?

supports a ^the ideology of^ filmmaker such as Godard. Ironically, Godard's work is more reflective of the "Hollywood B-film" than the lack of "inner life" -- though that lack may also be evident. To quote Lawson (p. 238-239): "The relationship of the modern European film to its American antecedents is both ideological and technical."

Another criticism which may be levelled at Lawson is his lack of specifics. True, he cites many examples for ~~her~~ his various theories, but/they generally seem inconclusive. (Perhaps it is only ~~the~~ an affect of my resistance to his theories.) ~~They~~ He seems to twist certain key films to suit his theorizing. Take for example his investigation of Un Chien Andalou: he usurps the power of Bunuel's images by declaring that Bunuel's violent pictorial style is intended to illustrate "that casual and horrifying brutality is endemic in our existence" (p. 232). One factor discrediting Lawson's argument is his inaccurate description of the famous sequence when the young man drags priests and donkey-laden pianos into the room where the young woman he has molested cowers in the corner. Lawson has it that he is "attached" to the ensemble when in fact he is actually detached and picks up the rope with which he pulls everything into the room. Inconsequential as this detail may seem it still determines some interesting points of motivation: did the character incur these encumbrances upon himself or were they attached by some outside force? Lawson's analysis leads us one direction and the film another.

Overall Lawson rejects both the "Hollywood" film and the film of the "New American Cinema" (which was most active at the time that he wrote). The former because of its capitalistic allegiance to money and the latter because it refrains from exploring "social or moral issues" (p. 226). He, predictably, respects highly the work of Eisenstein, Dovshenko and Vertov and prefers a cinema which is at once "moral" and true to the actualities of the

time. Clearly the dedication to this book reveals his sympathies:

> To the Association of Film Makers of the U.S.S.R. and
> all its members, whose proud traditions and present
> achievements have been an inspiration in the preparation
> of this book.

SIGNS AND MEANING IN THE CINEMA

I

jeremy butler

english 166

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It's readily apparent why Peter Wollen's Signs and Meaning in the Cinema
is the best selling book on film theory in America. He writes fluidly,
equally at ease with Eisenstein and Godard or Godard's inspiration, films
of the American auteurs. He evidently enjoys the American commercial
cinema and feels the "art film" has been over-rated. Still, Wollen avoids
the stringent anti-intellectualism of, for example, interviews with Ford
or Hitchcock or certain passages of Manny Farber's writings. By stationing
himself in this all-encompassing middle ground he alienates few of the
intellectuals inclined to purchase a book on film aesthetics.

(He vitiates this objectivity somewhat in his concluding chapter when
he posits forcefully his theory of "interrogation". In spite of the final
chapter he remains aloof through most of the introduction, soiling himself
not with partiality.)

One indication that "Signs and Meaning" is aimed at the reasonably
intelligent, but either novice or cursory, student of film is the inclusion
of a section devoted to justifying the American film. He points out first
of all, that cinema worldwide is commercial -- the only difference between
American commercialism and French or Japanese or Italian (to name just a
few) is that Hollywood seems to be the best at it. He also constructs the
more tenuous second line of defense that many American directors came from
outside America (Hitchcock, Sirk, Siodmak, Lang, etc.). Perhaps in 1969
when Wollen first published the book this was necessary, but today it seems
superfluous to the serious film theorist. He describes the climate of film
criticism he was addressing thusly:

> Despite all that is fashionable about a taste for horror
> movies, it is still much less unquestioned than a taste
> for East European art movies...the main principles of the
> auteur theory...have not been established, certainly not
> outside a very restricted circle. (p. 16)

Though Wollen claims reverence for the American cinema, he approaches

the work of, say, Hawks and Godard quite differently (p. 15).

> In the section of this book on the _auteur_ theory, I
> Wollen have tried to outline the theoretical basis for
> a critical investigation and assessment of the American
> cinema, as a model of the commercial cinema.

More than that, the _auteur_ theory to Wollen is _only_ relevant to the commercial

cinema (American cinema in this instance). He writes, "I do not in any

way want to suggest that it is only possible to be an _auteur_ in the popular

cinema." But, his book does not bear him out: the _auteur_ chapter deals

mainly with capitalist _auteurs_ such as Ford and Hawks and the chapter

entitled "The Semiology of the Cinema" mostly contains references to

foreign film. Why this segregation of aesthetics? Does Wollen have

doubts about applying a rigid methodology such as semiotics to American

commercial cinema? Well we might also ask ourselves why Wollen feels

impelled to interpret film through the use of a system stemming from

literature (semiotics). The answer must be that he believes "the study

of film must keep pace with and be responsive to changes and developments

in the study of other media, other arts, other modes of communication and

expression" (p. 7). We might add for Wollen, film or film criticism

doesn't need to follow other media in order to legitimize itself. Wollen

eclectically draws from many fields of aesthetics. He reasons that a

filmmaker as a matter of course draws from many different sources for his

education and hence the critic must also. His approach for studying

Eisenstein's theories is explained in this fashion:

> It seems to me that what is needed now is not an outright
> rejection of Eisenstein's theories but a critical reinvestigation
> of them, a recognition of their value, but an attempt to see
> them in a new light, not as the tablets of law, but _as
> situated in a complex movement of thought, both that of Eisenstein
> himself and that of the cultural milieu in which he worked._
> [emphasis added]

[handwritten margin note:] I THINK HE'S TRYING TO COME TO GRIPS WITH THE THEORY AS IT HAS BEEN ARTICULATED — & AS YOU KNOW, THIS HAS BEEN MAINLY WITH RESPECT TO COMMERCIAL AMERICAN CINEMA. BUT. YOU'RE RIGHT — HE MISSES A GOOD OPPORTUNITY TO DESEGREGATE FILM HISTORY.

This, then is how Wollen expects the intelligent critic to consider Eisenstein:
i.e., eternally cognizant of the "complex movement of thought" surrounding
us. This complex need not necessarily depend upon theories of literature and
established aesthetic traditions, but it may if the particular theories shed
some light on the work.

CRITICAL APPROACHES TO JEAN RENOIR

COURSE GUIDE: A

2+

WELL, I UNDERSTAND THE HANDICAPS YOU WERE UP
AGAINST WITH RESPECT TO MATERIALS & THEIR AVAILABILITY.
STILL, I THINK YOU MIGHT HAVE OBJECTIFIED THE CRITICAL
APPROACHES A BIT MORE — YOU TALK MUCH MORE ABOUT RENOIR THAN
ABOUT ANY OF THE CRITICS. YOUR WORK IS CAREFUL, THOUGH,
& INSIGHTFUL.

jeremy butler

english 166

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Jean Renoir is one of the few directors in the history of cinema to
deservedly and repeatedly be titled "master". No less a cinematic luminary
than Charlie Chaplin has called him the "greatest film director" and
critics of every persuasion still clamor to heap accolades on his work of
the thirties. Considering the breadth of his influence it seems especially
unfortunate that so few extensive studies exist on his work in English. As
of this writing the primary books on Renoir are Leo Braudy's Jean Renoir:
The World of His Films (the only one to originally appear in English), Andre
Bazin's Jean Renoir and Pierre Leprohon's Jean Renoir. (Also in print,
but unavailable for this study, is Raymond Durgnat's Jean Renoir.) General
consensus has detered me from a discussion of Leprohon's book and channeled
me into an investigation of the writings of Braudy and Bazin with tangential
asides into relevant articles by David Thomson, Andrew Sarris, William S.
Pechter, Barry Salt and Richard Roud.

    Bazin's book begins with an introduction by its editor, Francoise
Truffaut: "Andre Bazin and Jean Renoir have meant too much to me to speak
of them dispassionately. Thus it is quite natural that I should feel that
Jean Renoir by Andre Bazin is the best book on the cinema, written by the
best critic, about the best author."[1] Truffaut's passion aside, Bazin's
book is frustratingly incomplete. The fact that Bazin died before he could
properly finish his thoughts on one of his favorite filmmakers prevented
anything but an incomplete discussion of the themes of Renoir's films.
As a result I have relied on Braudy's work for a unifying structure. He
organizes his inquiry into "the world of his [Renoir's] films" "in terms
first of the two great motifs of nature and theater, then in terms of the
definitions of society, to which they must be related, and finally in terms
of Renoir's emphasis on actors and the emergent theme of the artist..."[2]
It is this paradigm that serves as the base for the present paper. Still,

I shall repair to Bazin many times in the course of the paper and, in particular, bring Bazin's theory of cinematic realism to bear on Braudy.

Two seminal concepts in the writings of Braudy and Bazin are "naturalism" and "realism", respectively. Neither Braudy nor Bazin consider realism/naturalism in terms of actually constructing a time or spatial continuum patterned precisely on real life -- as one might find in Andy Warhol's Sleep or Empire. Though naturalism and realism might be synonymous in some contexts, they denote markedly different entities in the aesthetics of Braudy and Bazin. Bazin refers to a versimilitude of situation and characterization; Renoir's characters are always ones that could very easily exist and function in the manner that the narrative has them act. They strike us as being drawn from real life. Braudy's conception of naturalism, on the other hand, is developed as an antimony to "theater", a concept he credits to Roger Greenspun. Simplistically speaking, theater is that which is ordered, predictable, confining and much more; while nature is wild, surprising, totally without order and expansive, among other things. Neither critic believes their realism/naturalism is automatically procured through the use of natural (such as location shooting or non-professional actors) details, as was to be relied upon largely in Italian neo-realism. As Braudy writes on early location shooting: "Natural details did not make woodenly played scenes any more authentic or creaky plots any more flowing."[3] And Bazin:

> ...realism is not the result of simple copying from life;
> rather, it is the product of a careful re-creation of
> character through the use of detail in characterization
> which is not only accurate but meaningful as well, and
> this is accomplished without recourse to dramatic conventions.[4]

For Bazin, Renoir "approaches the sublime" (Bazin's words) with small characters

or bits of action that ~~realistically~~ infuse his characters with the healthy glow of realism. This then is not the "realism" brought to the screen through the use of "authentic" settings and characters, but instead a realism generated through small details, admittedly culled from reality, but not an actual part of it.

Armed with this rudimentary knowledge of Bazin and Braudy's views toward realism/naturalism we may now investigate how each of them applies their thoughts to the study of Jean Renoir.

As mentioned previously, Braudy believes Renoir's films create an opposition of naturalism and theater. This might lead the Romantics among us to conclude that Renoir's films illustrate naturalism outlawing theater to the stage once and for all; the final stake in the heart of film d'art. Though Renoir is oft thought of as the precursor of neo-realism (Toni) and the keeper of realism's flame (at least in his films of the thirties) he did not, it is Braudy's contention, banish theater from his films. On the contrary, theater and naturalism temper each other:

> Naturalism breaks down the limitations of theater; theater
> brings order to the chaos of nature and instinct. Depending
> on which you hold constant, nature subdues artifice, or
> artistry absorbs naivete.[5]

Braudy chooses Le Crime de Monieur Lange for one of his primary examples. In that movie, M. Lange has created an artificial, fictional society set in 19th century Arizona. His main character, Arizona Jim, is the star of a periodical printed by a co-operative publishing company. The "Arizona Jim" magazine requires authentic covers and as a result the members of the publishing commune occasionally dress in cowboy and indian garb to pose for the cover photograph. Braudy interprets it thusly: word?

> The commune's posturing in artificial clothing projects
> a vision of social order more humane and vital than the

> nominal "realities" of the world outside the little
> Parisian court where the commune is located.[6]

In other words, the harsh realities of middle class Parisian life are
softened by the application of art, which Braudy regards as synonymous with
theater. *IS THIS A REASONABLY VALID GENERALIZATION WITH RESPECT TO RENOIR, BY THE WAY?*

One of the most common elements of theatricality Braudy discovers
running throughout Renoir's oeuvre is the aristocracy. Initially the
aristocracy capriciously shoots worker's caps off targets (La Vie Est a Nous),
but they soon begin to realize their anachronistic character (La Grande
Illusion) and eventually retreat into theater (La Regle du Jeu) -- as Braudy
has it. He writes, "Robert de la Chesnaye from La Regle du Jeu tries to
preserve his world from chaos by an elaboate structure of style and theater."[7]
Even the calliope Robert unveils at the party is interpreted by Braudy with
an eye to its theatrical implications. (At this point Braudy loses his footing
a bit, so to speak.) He declares, "The calliope recalls a society in which
all the rules worked, but which is now accessible only as an artifact, an
archaic reminder of a lost past, enclosed within the frame of theater."[8]
Granted, the aristocracy was largely an anachronism by 1939 and perhaps it
did use theatricality to preserve itself, but to claim that a gay carnival
calliope suggests all that seems unlikely. If anything its raucous music
and jerkily moving figures suggest an era of chaos and disorder.

(Unfortunately this predilection for symbolic hyperbole permeates much
of Braudy's book. He is definitely at his weakest when he attempts
symbolic interpretation such as the above. Braudy would do well to head
Bazin's comment: "Nothing is more foreign than symbolism to Renoir's
familiar, loving, sensual style, to his intimacy with things."[9])

In any event, Braudy feels that Renoir's films at the end of the decade

(the thirties) indicate a "somber acceptance" of the impotency of theatricality
as a salve for the already festering aristocracy. Braudy again deals with
the crumbling aristocracy in his writings on La Grande Illusion. As with
La Regle du Jeu, the aristocrats represent a bygone day and this time at
least two different facets of the aristocracy are present:

> [The aristocracy] has become mere theater and each performance
> must be played as if it were the last. Rauffenstein does not qui
> quite admit that his day has past. But Boeldieu organizes
> his own character around principles of style. He will not take
> part in the amateur theatricals the camp show because, he
> says, "I am a realist." Yet his grandest gesture [performing
> on the flute to distract the guards] is a gesture of
> theater.[10]

This theme of stylizing oneself preoccupies Renoir in the thirties (according
to Braudy) in films such as La Grande Illusion, La Regle du Jeu, Madame
Bovary and Le Crime de Monsieur Lange. Braudy deems it the "psychological
analogy to the retreat to a closed society."[11]

Following La Regle du Jeu, Renoir left France and moved to the United
States following a brief stay in Italy. He was to return to France in
the fifties, but during what some critics consider a fruitless entr'acte
in America, he produced films that Braudy considers images of "confinement" --
in this instance, Braudy links "limited" with theater and "expansive" with
natural. In these films, especially Swamp Water, This Land is Mine and
Diary of a Chambermaid, the "aquarium light" (to borrow from Bazin) of the
studio sets confines and limits the characters. When he finally returns
to France with Le Carrosse d'Or in 1953 Renoir produces three successive
films dealing with theater as a vibrant life-giving source: Le Carrosse d'Or,
French Cancan (1955) and Elena et les Hommes (1956). In these three films
the spectator is drawn into the drama before him as he never was in previous
Renoir films.

The bright images of the can-can girls at the finale of French Cancan

but entice the viewer. Just as the patrons of the Moulin Rouge nightclub,

we are assaulted by brilliant swirls of color. As Andrew Sarris writes,

"Renoir hurls his can-can dancers at the audience and defies it to withdraw

from the consuming spectacle."[12] This is not the protective theater of

Robert de la Chesnaye or the confining theater of the American films, but

instead an invigorating display, filled with verve and highly entertaining.

Braudy sums up Renoir's use of theater in this manner:

> In its many mutations of theme and method, from the start
> of his career, it has furnished an ever-replenishing refuge
> of order amid the freedoms of nature.[13]

Bazin skirts the entire issue of theater versus nature by assuming there

ought to be no difference between the two. "Cinema will be fulfilled," he

has written, "when, no longer claiming to be an art of reality, it becomes

merely reality made art."[14] In the time being though, movies will have to

content themselves with being the art of reality; an art that Renoir

utilizes masterfully. As Bazin has pointed out, the camera's proclivity

to produce a realistic image has necessitated the use of images of the world

around us for expressing narrative in film. "In the final analysis, the

principle of a director's style lies in his way of giving reality meaning."[15]

This mode of thought has led Bazin to deify realism in many of his articles.

For example:

> The soundtrack of La Chienne is consistently excellant
> thanks to the on-location recording. The atmospheric noises
> are fantastic because they are real....Even in the scenes
> consisting completely of dialogue, which were shot in the
> studio, the sound is realistic.[16]

IS THIS SIMPLY AN ODD TRANSLATION, OR IS IT BAZIN?

However, one must understand that Bazin does not believe that realism should

be a film's sole raison d'etre or even that a congruence with reality ensures

a superior movie:

> There
> This is no point in rendering something realistically

unless it is to make it more meaningful in an abstract
sense. In this paradox lies the progress of the movies.
In this paradox too lies the genius of Renoir, without
doubt the greatest of all French directors.[17]

Conversely, theatricality does not guarantee a movie will be a failure.

WHAT'S THE 'ILK'?

The initial reaction of Bazin and many critics of his ilk to Renoir's highly

controlled efforts such as Diary of a Chambermaid was dismay that America

would affect an artist so. Bazin was later to recant and admonish himself

for "seeing failed realism in the most surreal and deliberately imaginary

of all Renoir's films."[18]

Even though Bazin mentions abandoning "the futile criterion of realism"[19]

in his section on Renoir in America, his writing bears much allegiance to

an aesthetics predicated upon realism as the ideal. The example dealing

with La Chienne above is not isolated, example. He seems satisfied enough

when Renoir leans heavily toward either realism (la Chienne) or theatricality

(Diary of a Chambermaid), but in general practice he favors films with a

realistic bent.

It should be kept in mind that Bazin's conception of realism was not

so simple as to center upon location shooting or the use of non-professional

actors, but instead involved great subtleties of content and form. Perhaps

the best known of Bazin's theories deals directly with realism. By this

I mean his views on depth of field. In "The Evolution of the Language of

the Cinema"[20] Bazin talks directly and convincingly of the three faceted

affect of the use of deep focus:

> (1) That depth of focus brings the spectator into a relation
> with the image closer to that which he enjoys with reality.
> Therefore it is correct to say that, independently of the
> contents of the image, its structure is more realistic;
> (2) That it implies, consequently, both a more active mental
> attitude on the part of the spectator and a more positive
> contribution on his part to the action in progress. While
> analytical montage only calls for him to follow his guide, to

> let his attention follow along smoothly with that of the
> director who will choose what he should see, here he is
> called upon to exercise at least a minimum of personal choice.
> It is from his attention and his will that the meaning of
> the image in part derives.
> (3) From the two preceding propositions, which belong to the
> realm of psychology, there follows a third which may be
> described as metaphysical. In analysing reality, montage
> presupposes of its very nature the unity of meaning of the
> dramatic event. Some other form of analysis is undoubtedly
> possible, but then it would be another film. In short,
> montage by its very nature rules out ambiguity of expression.

While article number one may be accepted rather calmly, the second and

third statements encounter difficulties if subjected to scrutiny. In

Twenty-four Times a Second William S. Pechter makes a logical case refuting

Bazin's claims to the democracy inherent in deep focus. He concludes with

this statement:

> It is not that Renoir lets you look where you will but
> rather that he gives you more to look at; when one says
> that he doesn't direct one's eye, one actually means that
> he directs it with that art which conceals art and with a
> consummate subtlety. Yet no less than in the films of
> Eisenstein it is the artist's vision that our eye is finally
> brought to see.[21]

In conjunction with Renoir's deep focus Bazin believes that the cause

of realism will be best served by long takes which give ones eye the

oppurtunity to peruse the entire (in focus) frame. Additionally the longer

takes preserve the film's temporal unity and the dramatic whole. Bazin

doesn't apply this aesthetic solely to Renoir, but uses it as criterion of all

films' realism. Recently statistical analysis by Barry Salt has revealed

that Bazin's classification of directors of the thirties and forties into

two groups, those using longer shots and deep focus and those avoiding it,

does not stand the test of statistics. Salt found, for example, that the average

shot length of Citizen Kane's deep focus photography differs imperceptively

from films of the period using standard focal techniques.[22] All the same,

he did determine that indeed Renoir uses more very lengthy shots than most

films of the period.

In terms of narrative development, Renoir's occasionally digressive inclusion of small details such as the German prison guard in La Grande Illusion suggests reality both by their authenticity and by their mere presence; a presence which oft times "detracts" from the main story. These minute character clues characterize the members of Renoir's fictional societies with the economy of expression that is Renoir's trademark. Bazin contends: "It is the multiplicity of 'realistic inventions' which accounts for the substance of La Grande Illusion and which explains its undiminished impact years after it was made."[23] Bazin also believes that Renoir's "crude" (as some critics would have it) narrative construction -- the gaps in storyline and the like -- manifest his realism. He (Bazin) feels Renoir is intentionally loose with his structure so that his camera does not bound the action, but is merely capturing the action as it passes through the frame. In a cinema in which the cameraman must "let his viewfinder play over the action"[24] there are destined to be loose connections between shots or sequences.

Whereas Bazin interprets this crudity of expression as the result of Renoir's realism, Sarris declares it the manifestation of Renoir's "warmth and humanism"[25] (two of the most commonly used words in writings on Renoir). In a review of Le Crime de Monsieur Lange written 29 years after its French release, Sarris writes:

> Where even Bresson, for example, frames characters, Renoir
> follows them. Life is always spilling over a Renoir frame
> as if the screen were not big enough to encompass all of
> humanity.[26]

Though, in Sarris' view, the common critical evaluation of pre-La Grande Illusion Renoir is that his work is "primitive", Sarris posits that this supposed primitiveness is actually the ideal form for Renoir's content.

Which is to say that an artist as concerned wi h the state of the human race as Renoir, reveals his concern in his high regard for actors and actresses and their contributions to a film. In order to satisfy the characteristics of an actor Renoir must sometimes sacrifice the slick continuity of, say, a director as disdainful of actors as Alfred Hitchcock. In Sarris' words: "Only when style is confused with meaningless flourishes does Renoir's economy of expression seem inadequate for textbook critics."[27]

Considering Sarris' observation of the contribution of actors to Renoir's films it seems surprising that Sarris feels compelled to stick to his auteurist guns when generalizing about Renoir. To wit: "Renoir's career over forty years is a river of personal expression."[28] It seems especially ironic that Sarris should speak of "personal expression" (and thereby largely discount the efforts of the actors) in the review of Le Crime de Monsieur Lange, a film heavily dependent upon the communal effort of the French leftist artist group, Groupe Octobre. As Bazin wrote, "It would be impossible to separate the acting in Le Crime de Monsieur Lange from any consideration of its style. The actors contributed perhaps as much to the film's style as did the director."[29]

Renoir's treatment of actors is one aspect upon which all the critics concur. Most interpret Renoir's great respect for his actors as further evidence of his inspired humanism, Bazin reads it additionally as an aspect of realism, but all realize that Renoir skillfully molds his movies to the resonances of his actors and actresses. David Thomson quotes Renoir as having said, "I don't want the movements of the actor to be determined by the camera, but the movements of the camera to be determined by the actor."[30] Though in lesser directors this reliance upon the character of the actors might lead to a slavish dependence on the star system, choosing ones actors on their already

develpped characterizations, Renoir oft times chose actors for roles far from

their accustomed stereotype. Richard Roud, in an article explaining why

La Regle du Jeu is his "favorite movie", explicated part of the casting for

the film:

> It is an open secret, for example, that he [Renoir]
> chose Nora Gregor for the part of Christine because he
> had fallen in love with her, and only as he began to make
> the film did he realize her inadequacies -- her physical
> awkwardness, her difficulties with the French language...
> His use of Dalio to play the marquis raised a lot of
> eyebrows, for he was not exactly the most aristocractic
> of types; it works because Renoir convincingly changed
> him from a patron of the arts into a half-Jewish collector of
> musical toys.31

One might think that the discrepancies between actor and character would

generate a cacophonous dischord, but fortunately Renoir transcends this

disharmony in a fashion that can only be described by Bazin:

> Renoir does not choose his actors, as in the theater,
> because they fit into a predetermined role, but like the
> painter, because of what he can force us to see in them.
> That is why the most spectacular bits of acting in his
> films are almost indecently beautiful. They leave us with
> only thememory of their brilliance, of a flash of revelation
> so dazzling that it almost forces us to turn our eyes
> away. At moments like these the actor is pushed beyond
> himself, caught totally open and naked in a situation which
> no longer has anything to do with dramatic expression,
> in that most revealing light which the cinema can cast on
> the human figure more brilliantly than any other art
> except painting.32

At this point it is important that we return to Braudy's thoughts on

Renoir in order to consider his theories of society and the hero. Briefly,
                        Renoir's
Braudy feels that/films of thirties, in particular Le Crime de Monsieur Lange,

concentrate on the image of ~~simply~~ surviving wihfin a harsh society such as

working class Paris. In Le Crime de Monsieur Lange this is accomplished

with some success by creating a communal society within the larger society.

Unfortunately this is not without drawbacks as the hero is forced to flee

as consequence of actions he has undertaken to protect the commune. In the

forties (in America), Renoir considers not communities within larger societies, but free individuals -- some of whom exist not within the society proper, but on its outer reaches (e.g., Tom Keefer in Swamp Water). Then in the fifties Renoir abandons his research into present day communities in order to resurrect communities of periods bygone. In summing up Renoir's treatment of community, Braudy writes:

> In fascinating parallel to the movement of his own career--
> working with the équipe in the 1930s, under American
> production pressure in the 1940s and returning to France in
> the 1950s -- Renoir's attitude toward the interrelation of
> individual creativity and social value changes from cautious
> idealism about community, through pessimism based on
> individual isolation, to the potential of community of art
> created from the society of the past.[33]

All of which strikes me as being very tidy -- too much so in fact. The films of thirties especially resist an attempt to weave them into any convenient generalization of their attitude toward community. Certainly Le Crime de Monsieur Lange fits Braudy's schema, but would La Bête Humaine or Toni? Further, the prison community in La Grande Illusion evokes the "cautious idealism" Braudy mentions, but any idealism about communities that might be contained in La Regle du Jeu would have to be termed "dubious", not cautious. Additionally, where is the individual in isolation in the forties film, Diary of a Chambermaid? Unfortunately, Braudy's system of community in Renoir's films is broken up by so many exceptions as to render it useless.

Pechter echoes Braudy's ideas on community::

> ...it is the failure to reconcile the two movements
> [toward freedom and society] which has given his work,
> dispite its immense gaiety, that sadness and ambiguity
> which characteristically underlie it.[34]

For Pechter this failure to achieve reconciliation powers the best of Renoir's work including Le Crime de Monsieur Lange, French Cancan and Diary of a

Chambermaid -- spanning the three major periods of Renoir's career. If

Pechter's dialectic initially seems a slight bit easier to accept than

Braudy's self-admittedly tenuous observations it may be due in large part

to the universalness of Pechter's two main components, freedom and society.

Indeed, most any film may be interpreted in terms of the interaction of

freedom and society, if one is willing to go the necessary lengths to

fabricate suitable rationalization.

Braudy augments his theory on society with the theme of the artist-

hero. In his view this theme runs throughout Renoir's films begining with

Monsieur Lange and continuing through to Danglard (of French Cancan).. At

first the artist is coerced into social action, but by the time of Woman on

the Beach (1946) this social dimension has dwindled to nothing. In the

fifties, Renoir develops a new brand of heroism; one which Braudy explains

thus:

> This is the heroism of perception, understood specifically
> as an aesthetic perception and creativity that can restore
> society as well as understand it.[35]

Renoir's artist of the fifties, according to Braudy, is one who stands outside

the main society and through the added perception that such a vantage point

affords orders the world surrounding him or her into an artistic creation.

This leads the artist to a lonely existance, but one which can be very

fufilling if the artist is able to satisfy himself with his artistic creation.

(e.g., Danglard cares not for any of his showgirls, but contents himself with

molding newer, inexperienced girls into expert performers).

In conclusion, we have a long way to travel before appeoaching a totally

logical, satisfactory elucidation of the art of Jean Renoir. The present
offerings offer far and away too little: Bazin's book, though stimulating
reading, contains too little while Braudy attempts to schematize too much.
Le politique des auteurs has been applied to Renoir in a slap-dash manner --
confounding determination of any unity of that group's thought. Also
missing is structuralist analysis of Renoir's work. Let's hope that the
near future will see a rigorous application of the various critical schools
to Renoir's sadly neglected work.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Andre Bazin, Jean Renoir, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), p. 7.

[2] Leo Braudy, Jean Renoir: The World of His Films, (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1972), p. 22.

[3] Ibid., p. 28.

[4] Bazin, op. cit., p. 63.

[5] Braudy, op.cit., p. 22.

[6] Ibid., p. 86.

[7] Ibid., p. 89.

[8] Ibid., p. 90.

[9] Bazin, op.cit., p. 106.

[10] Braudy, op.cit., p. 79.

[11] Ibid., p. 77.

[12] Andrew Sarris, Confessions of a Cultist, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971), p. 41.

[13] Braudy, op.cit., p. 102.

[14] Bazin, op.cit., p. 118.

[15] Ibid., p. 84.

[16] Ibid., p. 28.

[17] Ibid., p. 85.

[18] Ibid., p. 95.

[19] Ibid., p. 95.

[20] Andre Bazin, What is Cinema?, (Berkeley: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1974), p. 35.

[21] William Pechter, Twenty-four Times a Second, (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1971), p. 202.

[22] Barry Salt, "Statistical Style Analysis of Motion Pictures", Film Quarterly, Vol. XXVIII, No. 1, Fall 1974, p.22.

[23] Bazin, op.cit., p. 63.

[24]Ibid., p. 89.

[25]Sarris, op.cit., p. 132.

[26]Ibid., p. 132.

[27]AndrewSarris, The American Cinema: Directors and Directions, (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., 1968), p. 74.

[28]Sarris, "Confessions", op.cit.,p. 131.

[29]Bazin, Jean Renoir, op.cit., p. 46.

[30]David Thomson, Movie Man, (New York: Stein & Day, Co., 1967), p. 86.

[31]Philip Nobile, Favorite Movies, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc.; 1973), p. 101.

[32]Bazin, Jean Renoir, op.cit., p. 80.

[33]Braudy, op.cit., p. 132.

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